

This past week, Jean was excited to receive phone calls from all three of her children. It is a fairly rare occurrence when they all call around the same time. Heck, that did not even happen on her birthday or on Mother's Day. So when I heard the news, being the cynical soul that I am, I immediately wondered what was wrong. Fortunately, I am now smart enough to realize that sharing such sentiment out loud is not a helpful response by a husband. So instead, I waited patiently to hear the news about what was wrong. Jean proceeded to tell me that her daughter in Florida called to report that her husband's plumbing business had totally dried up, so to speak. Her daughter on Lookout Mountain phoned and advised that the company her husband worked for had no more business after the job they were doing was completed. Finally, the Prodigal Son called to inform his mother that the Las Vegas economy is on the skids, and his job at the printing company is in serious jeopardy.

Meanwhile, back at the church office and on the streets of Page, I have had one encounter after another with parishioners and others close to this parish, who are dealing with acute physical maladies or intense emotional pain. Some have described seeing no way out of their depression and others have contemplated suicide.

That word depression is interesting, is it not? We use it to describe the situation that creates job loss for Jean's kids and so many others today, as well as what happens to each of us when we have an emotional crisis, like so many of us are having right here. All of this has come to a head right now, at the time of year when we are facing the darkest days of the year. Next Sunday is the winter solstice, that day of the year

with the least amount of daylight. Even if we were not facing an economic crisis and an extreme level of emotional anxiety for various reasons, it would still be natural for all of us to get the solstice blues. The utter darkness of the season seems to link directly with whatever darkness is in our souls.

This year, though, the darkness is far blacker than normal. The natural darkness of the season has combined with the bleak economic conditions, and aligned itself to a world saturated with more anxiety and stress than I have ever seen in my lifetime.

Thank God that it is Advent. Church calendars do not always coincide with what it is going on our personal lives, but there is a good reason why Christianity placed this season smack dab in the middle of all of this darkness. There is an excellent reason why we chose to celebrate Christmas on December 25, four days after that solstice event. In reality, we have little idea at what time of year Jesus was born. But how could there be a better time to celebrate the light that the Gospel of John speaks of today than right now? We can exist in the emptiness and pain of Advent because we know that the light is coming. It is that knowledge that can get each of us through these dark nights of the soul, no matter how deep and how painful our hurt has become. Advent comes in the nick of time, offering us hope that everything can change, that everything will change. Advent reminds us that hope, longing and desire are not childish emotions, but the very thing we need right now to get us to the light. Through the lens of the lame duck season of Advent, all of us can allow ourselves to believe that our new leaders will bring about economic change and that our deepest hurts can be utilized for good, that because of the pain we suffer now, we will come out the other side better and stronger

people, living in the dazzling light of Christ.

Yes, you say. Perhaps Advent does symbolically represent exactly what we need in this harmonic convergence of depression and darkness. We do need to wait in this emptiness and long for the light that remains beyond our view. But practically, how do we do it? How do we see past our pain to the light? That, of course, is the same question that the Hebrews asked the prophet Isaiah after hearing today's first lesson. Like us, they too were living in dark, desperate times. How, they want to know, could there be any hope, when they have just arrived back home to their beloved Jerusalem, and found absolutely nothing left? And Isaiah has the audacity to tell them that God will be sending good news to the oppressed, and care for all of them who are brokenhearted, that liberty will be proclaimed for those who are still held captive and that release is coming for those still in prison? Then in today's Gospel, we hear John tell us that there is a light coming into the world to banish *all* of this darkness.

God knows we would like to believe it. We always want to believe that someone is coming to save us. The Jews living in the time of today's Gospel were so desperate for someone to remove them from their darkness and misery that some of them actually thought this anti-establishment hippie guy, eating bugs and baptizing people outside the temple was going to be their savior. But as we just heard, John the Baptist was no savior. He was professing a message of hope all right, but he was not hope itself.

The same can be said for us today, sitting in our own Advent and looking for a way out of all this mess. Can Barack do it? Is he the one that can rejuvenate the economy, create sustainable energy and lessen our anxieties? Can he save us?

The mistake that the Jews of antiquity made, looking at everyone and hoping against hope that this one has come to save them, is the same mistake humans have made for centuries. The same one we make today. We want so bad for someone to come and extricate us from the pain and suffering. I'm sure that many of you have seen caricatures of Mr. Obama as the Messiah. It is a joke of course, but it plays into our human desire to have someone come and save us. Our desire for a savior to come pull us out of the mess is so strong, that we are often taken in by Hitlers and Stalins and Pol Pots. Religious folk are even more prone to fall prey to the savior complex. If we don't buy into the cults of a Jim Jones or a David Koresh, then we send all of our money to theologically bankrupt individuals like Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts. In Western religious history, we have done the same thing with the Pope. The whole bizarre notion of infallibility comes about through the human desire to find someone or something that will magically remove us from our suffering. We want someone to save us.

The Protestant Reformation was an attempt to remind us once again that the Pope was not divine. But in the midst of doing so, we fell right back into the savior complex. We just replaced the Pope with the Bible, giving *it* divine status. The Bible is a wonderful gift and it can help us tremendously, but it is not a savior.

All of this is why it is so difficult for us to escape from the darkness. Our secular teachings and our religious theologies continue to suggest to us that we wait for the one who is coming to save us and unlock the gates for us.

Is that what we are waiting for this Advent? Is that the way we understand Christ, the one who is coming to take away all our pain? Is Christ the one who is going to

beam us up out of our problems? That is, after all, orthodox theology for many Christians. If we just believe in him, we are told, all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

Well, beloved, I need to tell you that it is just that theology that I believe has actually exacerbated our suffering. The person that we are waiting for is not the prince in a Walt Disney story and by passively sitting around waiting for a Cinderella savior to whisk us away, I believe we harm ourselves and misinterpret the Gospel. Let us remember that not only does John the Baptist reject the title of savior, Jesus will go on to do the same. Never does Jesus refer to himself in that manner. When others use such language about him, he immediately deflects it. Jesus rarely talks about himself at all in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead, he consistently points away from himself to God's message.

When Jesus begins his ministry, he does so by quoting today's first reading. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the prisoners go free." It's never about himself for Jesus, but rather it is about God's mission for him. And today's first reading is God's mission statement. Then at the Last Supper, Jesus will tell the apostles and all of us that this mission statement of God's is now ours. It becomes our job to live into the words of today's reading from Isaiah.

Here then, is what I believe is the real key for dealing with the darkness in our lives. By his example, Jesus taught us that if we are to live in hope, we need to stop looking to him and start looking at what he pointed us toward...God and God's mission. Our hope lies in the fact that every time we bring good news to the oppressed, we are

bringing God's presence to ourselves and to the world. Every time we proclaim liberty to the captives, God is in our midst.

This is a profoundly different message than many of us have been taught. In fact, it suggests to me that the classic Christian theology of the Middle Ages had it all backwards. Despite what we have all heard, it is not our belief in Christ that allows us to hope. It's not even our belief in God. I'm sure that God would be pleased if we believe in God. But that's not the point of the Christmas story. What it teaches us is that God believes in us. And that is the key for how we deal with the darkness in our lives. We can get through the most painful processes of life, we can have hope and wait in joyful anticipation, because our God cares for us so much that our God became one of us and joins us in the struggle. We have hope because our Savior's belief in us has never wavered. We have hope because our Savior does not come in royal robes or as a world leader, but in the midst of the brokenhearted, to the captives and the prisoners and you and me. We can have true hope today, because our God believes in us so much that God came to us in the midst of our poverty and despair. We can have hope today because Jesus did not point to himself as a savior, but instead pointed to God's message of good news for all. That is the light that John proclaimed in Jesus and Jesus in turn asks us to proclaim it to the world.

When we fully realize the ramifications of a God who believes in humanity, we cannot help but be full of joy and hope, despite whatever happens to us.

For those of you who remain unconvinced that the knowledge of a God who believes in you can take you out of your pain, let me ask you to step out the front door of

the narthex when you leave here today. There, in the midst of the decaying leaves, you will see a small sign marking the cremains of one Mary Hunka. For those of you who never met Mary, her feisty approach to life symbolizes the spirit of St. David's. She continues to be an inspiration to many of us. Living with the worst form of the degenerative disease, multiple sclerosis, Mary never allowed herself to lose hope. Even in her last days when she could no longer even feed herself, Mary continued to rally everyone around her, convincing them that life was worth living and that they could make a difference. She taught us that by actually believing in Christmas, by accepting the notion that God believes in us, we can handle anything and we can accomplish anything. It is impossible to capture the essence of a person on a small memorial, but I hope Mary is pleased with the phrase I chose to remind us of her. It says, "Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts." Beloved, when we truly understand that God believes in us, we can always be joyful, even when we have considered all the facts.

All of us can have hope in the worst situations when we truly understand the ramifications of a God who believes in us. And when we proclaim God's belief in us, we, like Mary, can create for ourselves and for others the liberty Isaiah tells us about today.

Perhaps our Jewish sisters and brothers, who continue to face more oppression and heartache than we can ever imagine, have embraced this theology of hope better than we have as Christians. I think of the story Rabbi Hugo Gryn tells of being sent to Auschwitz as a little boy. In the midst of the death and horror, his father understood the importance of bringing the light of hope into the world. One winter's night he gathered

his family and reminded them that it was the first night of Chanukah. His young son Hugo watched in horror as his father pulled a thread from his ragged clothes and then took the family's last pad of butter and made a makeshift candle out of it. He yelled at his father, "No, please, that is our last bit of food! How shall we live?" And his father replied, "Son, we can live for many days without food! But we cannot live for a single minute without hope. This is the fire of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere."

Today, I ask all of you to never let the light go out. Let us all live in joyful hope, always reaching for and longing for the world that Isaiah describes to us this morning. Let us all stop waiting for a Messiah that is coming to save us and take away our problems, and instead relish the unbelievable concept of a God who believes in us, a God who is truly with us in our darkest moments. It is that image of God that has the power to turn our greatest pain into our greatest growth. Keep waiting beloved. The light is coming. Amen.